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ABSTRACT

Some researchers have found men to attribute more sexual meaning to heterosexual interactions than do women. This study was conducted to examine factors which may enhance or diminish this gender difference on perceptions of sexual intent by considering the three variables of physical attractiveness of target, similarity of target's personality to his or her partner's personality, and whether the respondent was a high or low self-monitor. Male (N=94) and female (N=94) undergraduates were grouped in mixed-sex pairs and discussed their likes and dislikes about college life. Subjects then rated their partners on a set of sexuality trait adjectives. The results revealed that males perceived their female partners as more seductive, sexy, and promiscuous than females perceived their male partners. Both males and females perceived highly physically attractive people in more sexual terms than they did those who were of average or below average physical attractiveness. In addition, both genders attributed more sexuality to partners perceived as possessing a personality very similar to their own. While these results do not help predict which individuals are more likely to misperceive others, they do help predict who is most likely to be misperceived. (NB)

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Factors Affecting the Misperception of Friendliness Cues in Initial Interactions

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Abstract

A laboratory study was conducted in which mixed-sex pairs of subjects discussed their likes and dislikes about college life. Subjects then rated their partners on a set of sexuality trait adjectives. Results indicated that males, compared with females, attributed more sexuality to their female partners. In addition, highly physically attractive partners and partners whose personalities were very similar to the subject's own personality were also seen in more sexual terms. These results are discussed in terms of how they extend Abbey's (1982) results and their implications for reducing the likelihood of misperceiving the intentions of members of the opposite sex.

Factors Affecting the Misperception of Friendliness Cues in Initial Interactions

A number of researchers have found that men attribute more sexual meaning to heterosexual interactions than do females (Abbey, 1982; Abbey, Cozzarelli, McLaughlin, & Harnish, 1987; Abbey & Melby, 1986; Goodchilds & Zellman, 1984). The purpose of this study was to examine factors which may enhance or diminish this gender difference in perceptions of sexual intent. Three variables were considered: the physical attractiveness of the target, the similarity of the target's personality to his or her partner's personality, and whether the respondent was a high or low self-monitor.

Physical Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness has a strong and consistent effect upon liking, personality assessment, and dating choices (Byrne, Ervin, & Lamberth, 1970; Huston & Levinger, 1978). While physical attractiveness is important to both women and men, Berscheid, Dion, Walster & Walster (1971) found that males were more concerned with the physical attractiveness of their dates than were females. This research suggests that men will find physically attractive female partners to be particularly alluring, and consequently, they will be motivated to find signs that their partners are attracted to them. This expectation may lead them to misinterpret platonic friendliness as sexual interest.

Personality Similarity

There is a great deal of evidence indicating that individuals are more attracted to others who either actually possess or are thought to possess similar opinions and beliefs (Byrne, Ervin, & Lamberth, 1970). Research also indicates that people prefer others who are similar to them in social characteristics, values, and some personality characteristics (Hill & Stull, 1981; Kandel, 1978; Kerchoff & Davis, 1962). If men are more attracted to similar women than dissimilar women, then they will be

more motivated to find signs that a similar partner is attracted to them. As for physical attractiveness, this expectation may cause them to misinterpret platonic friendliness as sexual interest.

Self-Monitoring

The personality trait of self-monitoring may relate to individuals' propensity to perceive sexual intent in others' behavior. Research has shown that high self-monitors, in comparison to low self-monitors, tend to emphasize the physical appearance of a potential dating partner (Omoto, DeBono, & Snyder, 1985; Snyder, Berscheid, & Glick, 1985), because of the favorable impression that a highly attractive date projects (Sigall & Landy, 1973). In addition, Snyder, Simpson, & Gangestad (1986) found that high self-monitors, in comparison to low self-monitors, tended to have an unrestricted or liberal orientation towards sexual relations. Given high self-monitors' emphasis on the physical appearance of others, high self-monitors may be more motivated than low self-monitors to find signs that an opposite-sex partner is attracted to them, especially when interacting with a physically attractive partner.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1a predicted that males would rate their partners higher on sexual traits than would females, replicating previous research (Abbey, 1982, Abbey et al., 1987; Abbey & Melby, 1986). Hypothesis 1b predicted that respondents would rate physically attractive partners higher on sexual traits than less physically attractive partners. Hypothesis 1c predicted that respondents would rate partners whom they perceived as possessing similar personalities higher on sexual traits than partners with less similar personalities. The findings of Snyder et al. (1986) lead to the prediction of Hypothesis 1d that high self-monitors, in comparison to low self-monitors, would rate their partners higher on sexual traits.

Method

Subjects

Michigan State University undergraduates participated in this study (94 males and 94 females).[1] Subjects were scheduled in pairs such that none of the participants were acquainted with their partners. Subject received extra credit toward their introductory psychology course grade in exchange for their participation.

Procedures

This study's procedures were similar to those used in Abbey (1982) except observers were not included. Subjects reported to a large anteroom with two adjoining cubicles. They were informed that the study concerned how the topic of conversation affected the smoothness of initial interactions and that they were to discuss their likes and dislikes about college life. The experimenter then left for five minutes in order to allow the subjects to discuss the topic. Upon re-entry into the room, the experimenter gave each subject a questionnaire packet and each subject was shown to a separate cubicle to complete the questionnaire. When both subjects had completed the questionnaires and had re-entered the anteroom, they were told that the study was over, were debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

Dependent Measures

Subjects first completed the 18-item version of the self-monitoring scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). The second measure was modeled after Abbey (1982). Subjects rated their partner on 20-trait adjectives using a 7-point response scale with response options which ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Key items that formed a Sexuality Index were flirtatious, sexy, seductive, and promiscuous.

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[1]. Because of incomplete responses on the self-monitoring scale, one male subject's data were excluded from the subsequent analyses.

Results

This study's sample size does not allow a complete 2(sex of subject) x 2(self-monitoring) x 3(physical attractiveness of partner) x 3(personality similarity of partner) design to be analyzed simultaneously. Instead, two sets of analyses were conducted: one which examined the effects of sex of subject, self-monitoring, and physical attractiveness, and the second which examined the effects of sex of subject, self-monitoring, and personality similarity. Comparable sex of subject and self-monitoring effects were found in both sets of analyses, so they are only reported once in the text.

Based on a tripartite split of the rating scale, participants were classified as being below average in physical attractiveness (if subjects received a rating of 1, 2, or 3 from their partner), average in physical attractiveness (scores of 4 or 5), or above average in physical attractiveness (scores of 6 or 7). Tripartite splits were calculated in the same manner for personality similarity.

Sexuality Index. Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted which combined the subject's ratings of his or her partner on the four sexual trait adjectives -- flirtatious, sexy, seductive, and promiscuous -- into a Sexuality Index (interitem correlations ranged from .27 to .62, $p < .001$). There was a significant effect for sex of subject, $F(4,172) = 3.62$ $p < .007$. Inspection of the univariate findings, which are presented in Table 1, indicated that, as predicted by Hypothesis 1a, males, as compared with females, rated their partners as being significantly more sexy, seductive, and promiscuous. No significant sex of subject effect was found on rating of the partner's flirtatiousness.

Insert Table 1 about here

The multivariate findings also indicated a significant main effect for physical attractiveness, $F(8,344) = 24.63$, $p < .001$. Inspection of the univariate findings, which are presented in Table 2, revealed significant effects for the adjectives flirtatious, sexy, seductive, and promiscuous. Tukey-

Kramer tests (Kirk, 1982) indicated, as predicted by Hypothesis 1b, that above average physically attractive partners were rated as being significantly more flirtatious, sexy, seductive, and promiscuous than below average physically attractive partners and significantly more sexy and seductive than average physically attractive partners (p's < .05).

Insert Table 2 about here

A significant multivariate self-monitoring by physical attractiveness interaction effect, F(8,344) = 2.02, p < .05, was observed. The univariate findings, which are presented in Table 3, indicated that there was a significant effect for the adjective flirtatious and marginally significant effects for the adjectives sexy and promiscuous. Tukey-Kramer analysis of the cell means revealed that low self-monitors made the largest distinction between below average and average physically attractive partners, while high self-monitors made the largest distinction between average and above average physically attractive partners (p's < .05).

Insert Table 3 about here

The multivariate findings also showed a significant main effect for personality similarity, F(8,344) = 5.24, p < .001. As can be seen in Table 4, the univariate findings indicate significant effects for the adjectives sexy, seductive, and promiscuous and a marginally significant effect for the adjective flirtatious. Analysis of the cell means using Tukey-Kramer tests indicated, as predicted by Hypothesis 1c, that partners perceived as having a very similar personality were rated as being significantly more flirtatious, sexy, seductive, and promiscuous than partners with dissimilar personalities and as being more sexy and seductive than partners with similar personalities (p's < .05). There were no significant

self-monitoring main effects or any other significant interaction effects, thus, Hypothesis 1d was not supported.

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

The results from this study replicate and extend Abbey's (1982) previous findings. Males perceived their female partners as more seductive, sexy, and promiscuous than females perceived their male partners. Both males and females perceived highly physical attractive people in more sexual terms as compared to those who were of average or below average in physical attractiveness. In addition, both sexes attributed more sexuality to partners perceived as possessing a personality very similar to their own compared to partners perceived as possessing a similar or dissimilar personality.

The results of this study do not help predict which individuals are more likely to misperceive others but they do help predict who is most likely to be misperceived. Physically attractive individuals are more likely to be perceived as behaving in a sexual manner than less physically attractive individuals. And individuals who are perceived as possessing a very similar personality are more likely to be perceived as behaving in a sexual manner than individuals who are perceived as having a less similar personality. Making such information available, particularly to people who date, may help prevent such misperceptions from occurring or from escalating into a forced sexual encounter.

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Table 1

Mean Ratings of Partner on Sexual Traits as a Function of Sex of Subject.

	Sex of Subject		
Trait	Male	Female	F-value
Flirtatious	3.05	2.92	ns
Sexy	4.18	3.70	8.74**
Seductive	3.11	2.54	8.81**
Promiscuous	3.42	2.86	6.24*
	n = 93	94	

Note. df = 1, 175

* $p < .01$

** $p < .004$

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Partner on Sexual Traits as a Function of Perceived Physical Attractiveness.

	Physical Attractiveness			
Trait	Below Average	Average	Above Average	F-value
Flirtatious	2.36	3.14	3.44	8.98**
Sexy	2.25	4.07	5.50	113.36**
Seductive	1.70	2.98	3.80	34.46**
Promiscuous	2.71	3.35	3.36	3.61*
	n = 54	85	48	

Note. df = 2, 175

* $p < .03$

** $p = .001$

Table 3

Mean Ratings of Partner on Sexual Traits as a Function of Self-Monitoring and Physical Attractiveness.

	Physical Attractiveness			
Self-Monitor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	F-value
Flirtatious				
High	2.68	2.86	3.88	5.76**
Low	2.05	3.43	3.00	
Sexy				
High	2.55	3.97	5.50	2.26*
Low	1.95	4.18	5.50	
Promiscuous				
High	2.97	3.23	3.76	2.34*
Low	2.45	3.48	2.95	
	n = 43	45	26	

Note. df = 2, 175

* $p < .10$

** $p < .004$

Table 4

Mean Ratings of Partner on Sexual Traits as a Function of Perceived Personality Similarity.

	Personality Similarity			
Trait	Dissimilar	Similar	Very Similar	F-value
Flirtatious	2.79	3.03	3.42	2.46*
Sexy	3.14	4.09	4.90	17.50***
Seductive	2.15	3.01	3.64	14.30***
Promiscuous	2.76	3.41	3.46	4.09**
	n = 65	82	40	

Note. df = 2, 175

* $p < .09$

** $p < .02$

*** $p < .001$